

# William Blake



[http://library.uncg.edu/depts/speccoll/exhibits/  
Blake/Blakeportrait.gif](http://library.uncg.edu/depts/speccoll/exhibits/Blake/Blakeportrait.gif)

# William Blake



- Born November 28, 1757
  - London, England
- Died August 12, 1827
  - London, England
- 69 years old

[http://www.johnmitchell.org/art\\_gallery.htm](http://www.johnmitchell.org/art_gallery.htm)

# Blake' s Life

- Early years
  - Began his artistic career at 10 years old when his father sent him to the best drawing school in England
  - Apprenticed to an engraver at 14
- Adult life
  - Always worked as an engraver and professional artist
  - Was very poor, especially later in life
  - Always felt rich in spirit



# Blake's Art



# Blake' s Life

- His life is considered “simple,” “boring,” when compared to the lives of his contemporaries (Coleridge, Shelley, Keats)
- Married to the same woman most of his life
- Never traveled

# Blake's Wife

- Married Catherine Boucher in 1782
- They were married until his death in 1827
- She assisted with the printing and hand coloring of his poems



[http://www.metmuseum.org/special/William\\_Blake/11.R.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/special/William_Blake/11.R.htm)

# Blake' s Death

- Suffered in his last years “that Sickness to which there is no name.”
  - Probably biliary cirrhosis
  - Caused by prolonged exposure to the fumes produced when acid is applied to copper plates
  - This was one of his methods of engraving

# Miscellaneous Blake Facts

- Claimed to see visions of angels, spirits, and ghosts of kings and queens
  - First vision seen at
    - age 4 (God at the window)
    - age 9 (tree filled with angels)
  - Favorite brother Robert died and came back to William in a vision to teach him an engraving technique
  - Saw visions until his death; on his deathbed, burst into song about the things he saw in Heaven

# More Blake Facts

- Arrested twice:
  - 1783: he and two other artists were arrested and accused of spying; were finally released once it was verified they were not French spies
  - 1803: put on trial for pushing a soldier out of his garden, allegedly saying, “Damn the king. All the soldiers are slaves.”

# Blake' s Poetry

- Work received little attention during his lifetime
- Most of his poetry was not widely published
- When his work was noticed, people thought it (and therefore Blake himself) was weird, confused, or mad

# “I must create a system or be enslaved by another man’s.”

- Illustrated most of his poems as well as those of other writers
- Printed most of his poetry himself



<http://wiredforbooks.org/blake/milton2a.jpg>



<http://4umi.com/image/art/blake/introduction.jpg>



<http://colophon.com/gallery/minsky/pegs/blakemh2.jpg>

# Blake's "Romantic" Tendencies

- If we see with our imaginations, we see the infinite; if we see with our reason, we see only ourselves
- Believed everything in life (every object, every event) was a symbol with a mystical or spiritual meaning
- His poems spoke out against social injustice
- His poetry and art reflect his struggles with the big spiritual questions:
  - Why is there evil?
  - Why do evil people sometimes prosper?
  - Why do the innocent suffer?

# Blake Bibliography



<http://www.gailgastfield.com/mhh/mhh1.jpg>

Poetical Sketches (1783)  
All Religions Are One (1788)  
There Is No Natural Religion (1788)  
Songs of Innocence (1789)  
The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790)  
Visions of the Daughters of Albion (1793)  
America, a Prophecy (1793)  
For Children: The Gates of Paradise (1793)  
Europe, a Prophecy (1794)  
Songs of Experience (1794)  
The First Book of Urizen (1794)  
The Song of Los (1795)  
The Book of Ahania (1795)  
The Book of Los (1795)  
For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise (1820)

# Songs of Innocence and Experience (1794)

- Subtitle: “The Contrary States of the Human Soul”
- Innocence: genuine love, trust toward humankind, unquestioned belief in Christianity
- Experience: disillusionment with human nature and society
- Poems in either “Innocence” or “Experience” are colored by the speaker’s state

# “The Lamb”



<http://images.encarta.msn.com/xrefmedia/sharemed/targets/images/pho/t010/T010668A.jpg>

Little lamb, who made thee?

Does thou know who made thee,  
Gave thee life, and bid thee feed  
By the stream and o'er the mead;  
Gave thee clothing of delight,  
Softest clothing, woolly, bright;  
Gave thee such a tender voice,  
Making all the vales rejoice?

Little lamb, who made thee?

Does thou know who made thee?

Little lamb, I'll tell thee;

Little lamb, I'll tell thee:

He is called by thy name,  
For He calls Himself a Lamb.  
He is meek, and He is mild,  
He became a little child.

I a child, and thou a lamb,

We are called by His name.

Little lamb, God bless thee!

Little lamb, God bless thee!

# “The Lamb” Explication

- Companion piece to “The Tyger”
- Connotations of innocence
- Symbolism:
  - Lamb = Jesus (“Lamb of God”)
    - Jesus is also known as a shepherd who leads stray sheep (sinners) back to the flock (humanity)
- Tone: joyful, bright, happy (contrast with “The Tyger”)
- Slant rhyme (name/lamb)

# “The Tyger”

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies  
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?  
On what wings dare he aspire?  
What the hand dare sieze the fire?

And what shoulder, and what art  
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?  
And when thy heart began to beat,  
What dread hand? and what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain?  
In what furnace was thy brain?  
What the anvil? what dread grasp  
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears,  
And watered heaven with their tears,  
Did he smile his work to see?  
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye  
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

# “The Tyger” Explication

- Companion piece to “The Lamb”
  - “Did he who made the Lamb make thee?”
- Questions the reason for the existence of evil in the world; did God create evil? Blake can't answer that question.
- Symbolism:
  - Blacksmith = God/Creator
  - Tyger = evil/violence
- Tone: dark, fearful, questioning



# “A Poison Tree”



I was angry with my friend:  
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.  
I was angry with my foe;  
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I water'd it in fears,  
Night and morning with my tears;  
And I sunned it with my smiles  
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night,  
Till it bore an apple bright;  
And my foe beheld it shine,  
And he knew that it was mine,

And into my garden stole  
When the night had veil'd the pole:  
In the morning glad I see  
My foe outstretch'd beneath the tree.

# “A Poison Tree” Explication

- Imagery
  - tree bearing poisonous fruit
- Metaphor
  - hatred or wrath
  - apple or plant
- Allusion
  - Garden of Eden
  - Adam and Eve
- Tone
  - confessional

## Stanza 1:

- Innocence (friend)
- Experience (foe)
- Don't hold a grudge
- Letting go of frustrations or problems prevents future problems

## Stanza 2:

- Fear, sadness, deceit all allow anger and hatred to “grow”

## Stanza 3:

- Apple = wrath
- Apple is irresistible to foe

## Stanza 4:

- “stole” has two meanings: “snuck in” or “took without permission”; both are applicable
- “pole” probably the North Star, indicates a foggy, especially dark night
- Actual murder not mentioned (speaker doesn't want to dwell on it?)

# Blake' s Influence

Jim Morrison  
got the name for The Doors  
from  
The Marriage of Heaven and Hell:

“If the doors of perception were cleansed,  
everything would appear to man as it is — infinite.  
For man has closed himself up till he sees things  
through narrow chinks of his cavern.”

# References

- [facultyweb.wcjc.edu/users/jonl/documents/Blake.ppt](http://facultyweb.wcjc.edu/users/jonl/documents/Blake.ppt)
- **William Blake.** <http://library.uncg.edu/depts/speccoll/exhibits/Blake/Blakeportrait.gif>.